Sonja Hildebrand

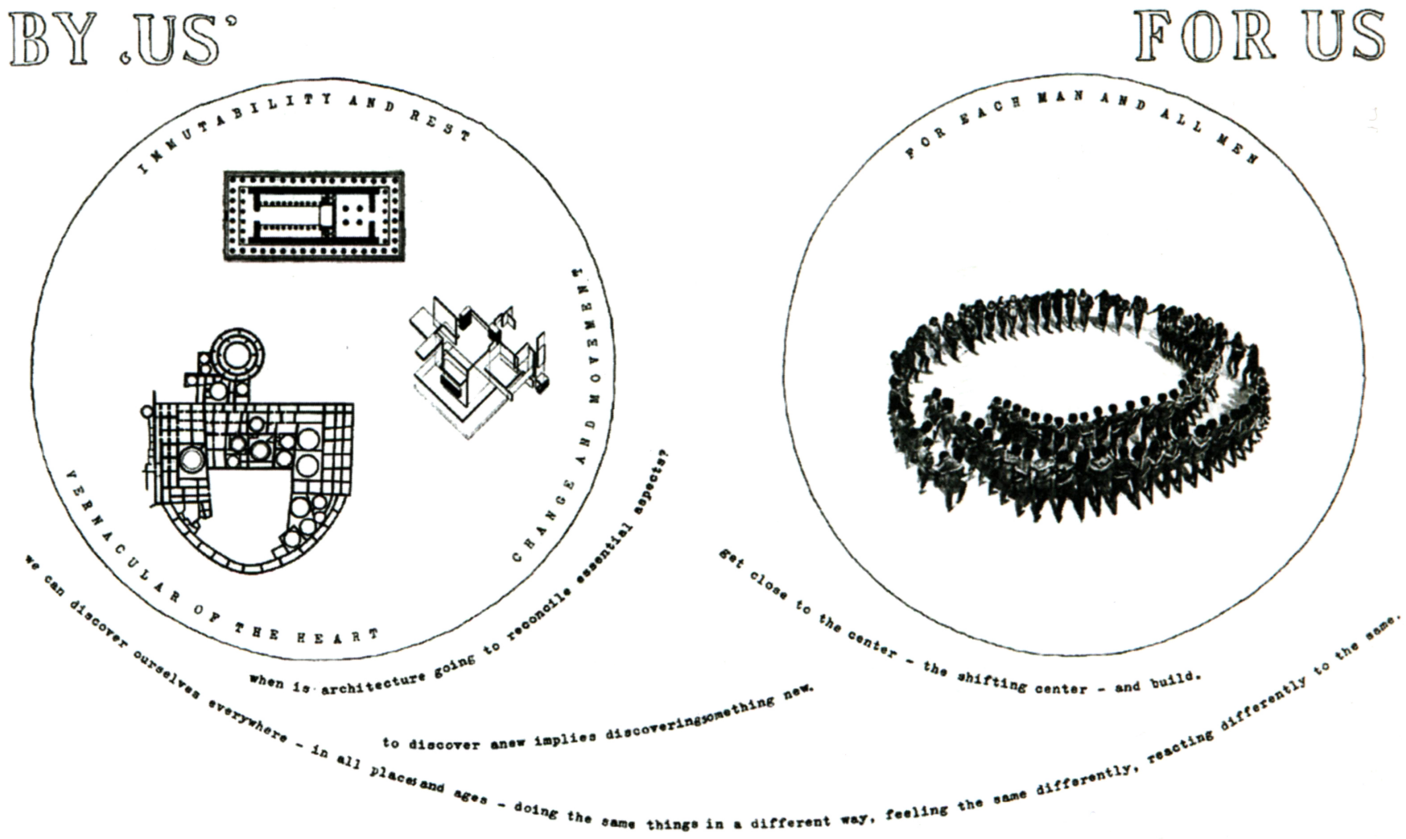
Working on Common Ground

Reflections about the relationship between architecture and history are as old as reflections about architecture itself. In Vitruvius's architectural theory, a knowledge of history forms the basis for the "correct" representation of historical content through architecture—or, to be more precise, through the decoration that is applied to buildings. In this view, history is thus regarded as having the nature of an auxiliary discipline; and the same would also apply to other disciplines relevant to architecture such as philosophy, medicine, and mathematics. It could therefore be argued that Vitruvius defines architecture by starting from its boundaries. According to him, architects may also cross these boundaries and thereby leave their own discipline: "But those to whom nature granted such wits, acuity, and good memory that they are fully skilled in geometry, astronomy, music and related disciplines, pass beyond the business of architects and are turned into mathematicians."[1]

In contrast to Vitruvius, who was a theorist of architectural practice, Leon Battista Alberti considered architecture from a philosophical perspective. He conceived of architecture as being an art of building that represented divine order. For Alberti, history was the practice of studying models from antiquity in order to improve the artistic representation of that divine order.

Architecture developed into a discipline in the modern sense in the late eighteenth century, acquiring specific academic foundations and its own rationally based rules and methods. In the competing conceptions of the discipline that have been put forward since then, architectural history may or may not be thought of as contributing to the fundamental elements of architecture. Gottfried Semper, for instance, based his theoretical work on both historical and scientific methods. In his "style theory," he aimed to identify general principles of architectural design through an empirical analysis of the history of architectural forms. In the process, he expressed his opposition to three types of architects who, in his eyes, were working on an inadequate theoretical basis: the "materialists," who based their work on scientific laws alone; the "historicists," who were voluntarily dependent on historical models; and the "purists, schematists, and futurists," who relied on an arbitrary canon of forms.[2]

Semper's ideas stood in opposition to nineteenth-century scientific ideals of objectivity and precision, whose application in the field of history was famously represented by Leopold von Ranke's *"wie es eigentlich gewesen"* ("how things actually were"). For Semper, such perfection was only attainable in art and religion: "Art has the same goal as religion," he writes in the *"Prolegomena" to Style*, "namely, relief from imperfect existence... But the two are opposites in that faith, through the mystery of miracles, immerses itself in the inexplicable, in formlessness, whereas art gives form to the formless and lets the miracle in a work of art seem natural, indeed



Aldo Van Eyck, Otterlo Circles, 1959.

necessary." Semper characterized science (including the humanities) as "a third form of the same striving for perfection." However, the aim of perfection was unattainable with science, for in his view, "the realm of the unknown stands in contrast with the circle of what has been explored... Science will thus always remain imperfect and incomplete in terms of form. Knowledge does not satisfy, only the striving for it does."[3] In other words, whereas art (including architecture) can produce perfect and complete forms (i.e., artistic or architectural objects) that are objectified by their adherence to true artistic principles, a historian can never produce a complete and objective description of history.

The field of what is referred to today as "architectural research" is dominated by an opposite approach of this to the architectural object. Margitta Buchert, for example, defines research-based, "reflexive" design as comprising material that goes beyond design and as a process that works toward "a continuous build-up of ... knowledge that not only precedes the concrete individual design, but also accompanies it and goes beyond it."[4] According to Buchert, each architectural project is thus not only based on knowledge acquired in previous projects, but also leads—more or less incidentally—to additional findings that are not or cannot be utilized in that particular project.

Something similar can be said of academic work, insofar as it not only encompasses conceptualization of a research project and a working hypothesis based on prior knowledge, but is also always associated with an openness regarding its possible outcome. "Openness" relates to the fact that one can never be sure whether a research design will work—whether the working hypothesis can be confirmed, or if the research findings may make it necessary to review or even abandon it completely and to conceptualize the project anew.

For both the academic and the architect, openness and the unknown may raise difficulties, since their task is ultimately to devise specific conclusions and resolutions for situations that could always potentially end differently. It can be argued, however, that openness, as a necessary aspect of scholarship, can exert a liberating effect on academic writing in general and on finalizing an academic text in particular. Academic texts are usually viewed as contributions to an emerging discourse that is not conducted by one person alone and cannot be initiated or concluded by a single publication. A scholarly essay can therefore only represent an intermediate stage. In this respect, basic research normally remains valid longest. In the field of the history of art and architecture, compiling catalogues of works would be a case in point. However,

such catalogues are rarely considered attractive research projects nowadays, since they are incapable of placing the researcher at the heart of ongoing debates.

For architectural design, on the other hand, it may be argued that openness to the outcome of a design process can be perceived as positive, particularly with regard to what Buchert described as the architect's "basic attitudes," "ways of thinking," "ideals," and "values." The material presence and durability of a building, by contrast, might rather work against a positive perception of its quality as a contribution to a discourse (ways of thinking, etc.). As a contribution to discourse, the specific form of an architectural object has, in principle, only a temporary validity, the duration of which may or may not correlate with the expected lifespan of the building.

Semper's response to the problem that a building's design is linked to a specific time was to focus on the artistic character of the building. His claim that "art gives form" is based on the idea of beautiful and consequently timeless form. With regard to the inability of academic study to produce an analogously beautiful form — i.e., a work that comprises the entire body of potential knowledge—Semper's answer was theory. An awareness that knowledge is always limited forces theories to be formed, for theories have more general relevance in comparison with the mass of empirically gathered facts. New facts, however, can potentially call for the revision of a theory. Theory and facts thus mutually influence each other in the interests of a reflective empiricism.

Based on what has been said so far, what follows is an attempt to determine the specific potential of teaching academic art history in architecture schools. As a premise, it cannot be based on an "identitarian" concept of art history. In principle, anyone can take an art-historical stance. What art history offers as a discipline is thorough instruction in and practice of art-historical knowledge and methods.

The question of which qualities characterize an art-historical stance and a resulting art-historical perspective cannot be answered without taking a position regarding the discipline, since diverging points of view already exist regarding the boundaries of art history as a subject area. One only needs to consider the discussions about extending art history to encompass a broader field of visual studies. There are also a wide variety of methodological approaches often developed by engaging with neighboring disciplines. The anthology *The Subjects of Art History*, for example, comprises contributions about the philosophy of history and art, semiotics, feminism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, perception, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, and visual studies. Older methods that were influential in the twentieth century, such as style history, formal art history, iconography, and iconology, were evidently no longer considered relevant and were left aside in the anthology.[5] What can be said though is that art-historical perspectives are generally more context-oriented today than analyses whose methodology have developed from a focus on the architectural object, whether it is formal, typological, tectonic, material, or another nature.

While knowledge of design and construction is not a core competence in art history, the purpose that art-historical perspectives can serve in the education of architects—and in the discussion of buildings in general—can be considered in the context of the wider notion of scientificity. This notion encompasses older qualities, the validity and relevance of which need to be emphasized again, and especially today. It is therefore a matter of determining the specific meaning of a scientifically compiled history of architecture, which art historians can offer the requisite expertise to. It should be reiterated at this stage that there can be no exclusive claim to an art-historical perspective that is linked to an academic background—even if it is an exception for a fresh graduate in another subject to write an excellent art-historical postgraduate thesis off the cuff.

In 1999, Mark Jarzombek, himself a trained architect, published a controversial essay claiming that what he calls a "pop" discourse in contemporary architectural history and theory lacked a number of qualities that could be attributed to a genuine academic engagement with architectural history:

> 1. Objectivization: the still desirable, even if unattainable, ideal of objectivity. This is bound up with the paradox that academic authors reflect on their authorship and must at the same time rise above it if possible. This is both banal and central, especially in times of fake news and the triumph of individual, otherwise unfounded views of the world.
>
> 2. Portrayals of complexity: in academic architectural history, there are no simple truths. To do justice to the complexity, the greatest possible circumspection is required. As one's own research is generally insufficient to probe all the ramifications of a subject, a knowledge of the state of research and its incorporation into the discussion is required.
>
> 3. Open-mindedness: a quality that contrasts with what Jarzombek described as the tendency toward "advanced architectural speculation" in relation to architects who read an author—often a philosopher—and develop stances accordingly that are as far-reaching as they are poorly based. Jarzombek could hardly put it more clearly: "Tschumi's late-Barthian theoricity, Koolhaas's careless and almost comical use of historical evidence, and Hartoonian's narrow reading of Adorno are at odds with the rapidly maturing demands of theory's historical discourse." While it is not a matter of

> questioning such readings in principle, it is if such stances are put forward in order to replace academic architectural history and theory.[6]

These points could and should be self-evident, and not require any further discussion. However, experience—and not just Jarzombek's examples—shows that these matters are continually being called into question, so that seemingly trivial basic considerations need to be regularly rethought and justified. This requires time, which historians of architecture working in academia can and must take. And what can we say this type of work might produce for the education of architects?

> 1. Greater clarity about one's own actions: how can what they are doing be described, as opposed to other ways of acting? What is an architectural project, compared to an academic one? What scope do one's actions have? How and where do they have long-lasting effects, and where is that less so?
>
> 2. An understanding that one's own stance and actions are part of a larger whole—part of global culture in the widest sense. This awareness helps one to reflect on their own position in terms of its prerequisites, conditions, and possibilities.

This leads to a final point, which is linked to a final question: why would the question of the relevance of art-historical perspectives be directed at the particularly field of more recent architectural history, whereas history reaching back to before 1850 is accepted far more readily as an area of art history?

Regarding 1850 as an "epoch-making year" may already require examination, as it corresponds to a periodization favored especially by historians of architectural modernism (Giedion, Frampton, et al.), whereas there is a tendency in the history of culture, of ideas, intellectual history, and general history to mark modernism as starting "around 1800." From a present-day perspective, however, a more compelling question is whether debates about art history in architectural education can be interpreted here as indicating a changed relationship with "history"? In other words, is older architectural history unproblematic because we view it as an archaeological phenomenon that has no "genetic" connection with the present day? Or conversely, if we treat the present as constituting the sum of what contributes to determining the way we live, think, and act, then what does that mean for architecture historians who approach the present day academically? Must historians of architecture deal with more recent history in the academic sense described, in full knowledge of the fact that they can never capture it "as a whole"? Is academic work on the present always an illumination of a partial aspect, with constant reflection on the many further partial aspects that cannot be apprehended? If so, does a relativization then get brought into architectural history that threatens to weaken it, but in successful cases may also strengthen it?

Art history as academic architectural history can contribute toward achieving an overview—both a partial one that can be gained and a total one that must remain a utopia. The overview helps place one's own position better in relation to others and improve collective foundations. In this respect, art history as academic architectural history means working on the common ground of architecture with the potential in mind of strengthening architecture's cultural power to act.

X

History/Theory is a collaboration between the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta), ETH Zurich and e-flux Architecture.

Sonja Hildebrand was scientific collaborator and substitute professor at the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta), ETH Zürich from 2001 to 2011. Since 2011 she has been Professor for the History of Modern Architecture at the Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio of the Università della Svizzera Italiana.

History/Theory is a collaboration between the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta), ETH Zürich and e-flux Architecture.

1
Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture* , I, I, 17, trans. Ingrid D. Rowland, eds. Ingrid D. Rowland and Thomas Noble Howe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 24.

2
Gottfried Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics* , trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Michael Robinson (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2004), 77–81.

3
Ibid., 98, footnote 9.

4
Margitta Buchert, "Call for papers," *Topics & Strategies. Design and Research in Architecture* , Symposium Entwerfen und Forschen in der Architektur, 4 (Leibniz Universität Hannover, June 19–20, 2014).

5
The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspective , eds. Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

6
Mark Jarzombek, "The Disciplinary Dislocations of (Architectural) History," in: *JSAH* 58, 3, (Sep. 1999), 488–493.